Election-Related Information Manipulation and Online Platform Risks in Bosnia and Herzegovina



1. Introduction

Citizens' Association "Zašto ne" is a civil society organisation based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, working on political accountability and information integrity, including through its fact-checking platforms Istinomjer and Raskrinkavanje. Ahead of, during and following the general elections held on 4 October 2026, Zašto ne monitored the electoral information environment. Istinomjer assessed the accuracy of public statements by political actors, including claims concerning electoral procedures, institutions and results, while Raskrinkavanje monitored election-related disinformation and information manipulation across online media and social media platforms. The findings presented here draw on this monitoring, focusing on findings that highlight the role of very large online platforms (VLOPs) in enabling and amplifying the dissemination of disinformation and manipulative narratives. A more comprehensive account of election monitoring is available in our full election monitoring report.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an EU candidate country, and a part of a closely interconnected European information environment. The same VLOPs operate across EU and non-EU countries, while shared languages, media audiences and diaspora communities facilitate the circulation of political content and narratives across

borders. This is particularly relevant for foreign information manipulation and interference, including narratives seeking to undermine confidence in democratic institutions, discredit the EU and challenge the European integration process. Yet candidate countries remain outside the EU regulatory and cooperation framework, without equivalent binding safeguards for addressing platform-related risks affecting their own democratic processes. These gaps matter beyond national borders, as vulnerabilities in neighbouring countries may also have implications for the EU's information environment.

In our recent policy paper, Online Platform Accountability and Information Integrity in the Western Balkans: Bridging the Gap Before Accession, we argue that preparations for future implementation of Digital Services Act (DSA) in EU candidate countries must be accompanied by practical cooperation to address platform-related risks already affecting democratic processes. This includes stronger engagement with major online platforms, greater involvement of independent researchers and civil society, and opportunities for candidate countries to participate in relevant European cooperation mechanisms, including those envisaged under the European Democracy Shield.

Against this background, the report examines both the narratives that shaped the electoral information environment and the tactics through which VLOPs were used to disseminate manipulative content and influence public discourse.

2. Election-Related Narratives and Information Manipulation

Monitoring of the 2026 general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina identified several recurring narratives that posed risks to public trust in democratic institutions and electoral processes. Particularly prominent were misleading claims questioning the integrity of electoral procedures and newly introduced voting technologies, alongside anti-Western narratives promoted by domestic and foreign political actors and media outlets.

2.1. Undermining trust in electoral processes and institutions

One of the most prominent patterns of election-related manipulation concerned narratives questioning the reliability of newly introduced electoral technologies, including electronic ballot scanning and fingerprint-based voter identification. Promoted by both political actors and media outlets, these narratives included unsubstantiated allegations of electoral fraud and misleading representations of technical difficulties, potentially undermining public trust in the electoral process and potentially discouraging participation.

Such narratives also circulated on major online platforms, particularly Facebook. Raskrinkavanje documented Facebook posts presenting isolated technical problems and delays at polling stations as evidence of widespread electoral chaos. Following the elections, dozens of Facebook posts spread the false claim that the Central Election Commission had annulled the general elections, although its decision concerned only one polling station.

Narratives questioning the credibility of electoral institutions also intersected with broader political messaging concerning foreign influence and Western involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as discussed below.

2.2. Foreign Political and Information Influence During the Election Campaign

As documented by Istinomjer, foreign officials openly supported particular domestic political actors, while political messaging and media coverage promoted narratives concerning the country's sovereignty, international relations and the legitimacy of Western involvement in its political affairs. Particularly relevant were Russian political engagement and anti-Western narratives portraying the European Union and other international institutions as sources of illegitimate political pressure and interference.

Russian political influence and anti-Western narratives

Russian officials publicly supported political actors in Republika Srpska, including through high-level meetings shortly before the elections and endorsements delivered at campaign events. This engagement was accompanied by narratives portraying Western countries, the European Union and international institutions as threats to Republika Srpska's autonomy, while cooperation with Russia was presented as an expression of political independence and the protection of national interests.

These narratives converged with messaging promoted by domestic political actors, particularly claims portraying Western engagement as interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal affairs. Russian diplomatic statements also intersected with domestic narratives questioning the credibility of electoral institutions, particularly the reliability of newly introduced electoral technologies.

The role of Russian media in promoting election-related narratives

Alongside direct political engagement, Russian media operating in the region promoted narratives that closely reflected the positions of political actors aligned with Moscow.

Monitoring conducted by Raskrinkavanje examined election-related coverage by RT Balkan, Sputnik and

Pravda between 4 September and 4 October 2026. The analysis identified consistent patterns of selective reporting that favoured political actors associated with the ruling structures in Republika Srpska while largely marginalising opposition candidates.

Electoral institutions, particularly the Central Election Commission, were frequently portrayed negatively, reinforcing narratives questioning the integrity of electoral procedures. Russian media outlets also reinforced narratives questioning the reliability of new electoral technologies, including through selective reporting on technical preparations and alleged irregularities. Furthermore, Western involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina was commonly characterised as illegitimate interference, whereas Russian political engagement was presented positively as legitimate cooperation. These narratives closely reflected those promoted by domestic political actors, reinforcing both distrust towards electoral institutions and broader anti-Western messaging.

These findings illustrate how foreign political messaging, selective media coverage and domestic political narratives converged around issues of electoral legitimacy and Western involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the monitoring does not establish the extent to which these narratives were disseminated or amplified through major online platforms, they provide important context for understanding the broader information environment in which online manipulation takes place.

3. Tactics of Online Information Manipulation

Monitoring of the 2026 elections also identified several tactics used to manipulate political discussions on VLOPs, particularly Facebook, Instagram and X. These included coordinated and potentially inauthentic activity, artificial engagement, deceptive AI-generated content, anonymous political promotion and paid advertising. Such practices were relevant not only to the dissemination of misleading information but also to the manipulation of perceptions of public opinion and political support.

3.1. Coordinated inauthentic behaviour and artificial engagement

Raskrinkavanje's election monitoring documented several instances of suspicious and potentially coordinated activity on Facebook involving different political actors. The investigations identified networks of profiles displaying repetitive political messaging, concentrated commenting activity and other behavioural patterns suggesting attempts to create an artificial impression of public support.

In one investigation, an analysis of 712 comments on six posts from a political party's Facebook page identified 67 apparently inauthentic profiles repeatedly posting supportive messages, often within concentrated time intervals. Another investigation examining 656 comments on six posts by an electoral candidate identified 15 suspicious profiles, many created shortly before or during the campaign, whose repeated and closely timed activity suggested an organised attempt to influence political discussions.

Further evidence of coordinated manipulation emerged from the *False Chorus* election monitoring study, produced by the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) in collaboration with Clemson University's Media Forensics Hub, with contributions from Zašto ne. The study identified a coordinated network of accounts operating across X and Facebook that promoted political actors associated with the ruling structures in Republika Srpska, discredited their opponents and questioned the credibility of electoral institutions.

The network was relatively small but deliberately compartmentalised, comprising approximately two dozen accounts on X organised into ten separate groups, or "pods", with corresponding personas on Facebook and Instagram. Rather than building substantial individual followings, the network relied on coordinated engagement to increase the visibility of political messaging and create the impression of broader public support.

A particularly notable finding was the network's exploitation of established media audiences. Coordinated accounts repeatedly intervened in comment sections under posts published by major broadcasters and political pages, inserting political messages into existing discussions and creating an artificial impression of spontaneous public engagement. This illustrates how relatively small networks can seek to influence political discourse by exploiting the visibility and audiences of established media outlets on social platforms.

3.2. AI-generated and manipulated content

Although relatively limited in number, AI-generated and digitally altered content also circulated on social media platforms during the election campaign, particularly Facebook, where it was used to discredit political actors and misrepresent campaign activities.

For instance, Raskrinkavanje documented an AI-generated video shared by a Facebook page, falsely presented as evidence of a candidate staging campaign-related activities, as well as a manipulated image circulated across Facebook profiles, depicting a political figure attending another party's campaign event. Raskrinkavanje also identified Facebook posts promoting supposed AI-generated predictions of election results presented without a reliable basis for such claims.

3.3. Anonymous political pages and paid promotion

Raskrinkavanje also identified a network of anonymous Facebook pages that published hundreds of identical or similar posts promoting one political party and discrediting its main opponent. Although presented as independent sources of political information or commentary, the pages consistently advanced the same political positions without transparent information about their political affiliations or editorial responsibility.

The monitoring also demonstrated how content originating on social platforms could acquire wider visibility through established media. In one case, unverified allegations about political bot networks published by an anonymous account on X were subsequently reproduced by multiple media outlets, including the public broadcaster in Republika Srpska, despite the absence of a sufficiently transparent or verifiable methodology. This illustrates how claims originating from opaque online sources can reach wider audiences and gain apparent credibility through mainstream media coverage.

Paid political promotion on Meta's platforms was another documented practice. Raskrinkavanje identified political campaigning on Facebook and Instagram before the official campaign period, including advertisements explicitly promoting candidates and others highlighting their official activities in ways closely connected to their

electoral campaigns. Some individual advertisements reached audiences exceeding one million users, according to the advertising data examined.

These documented practices also highlight limitations in the institutional framework for addressing election-related manipulation on VLOPs. While the Central Election Commission can sanction political contestants for violations of campaign regulations on social media, it lacks the authority to require platforms themselves to remove content directly. This illustrates the challenges of addressing platform-related risks through domestic electoral regulation without effective and enforceable mechanisms for cooperation with VLOPs.

4. EU-Related Narratives and Young Audiences Online

A further dimension of the online information environment concerns the circulation of EU-related narratives and the exposure of younger audiences to political information through digital platforms. Monitoring of the 2026 election campaign found that European integration and the reforms required for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession were largely absent from substantive electoral debate, while some political actors incorporated the EU into broader anti-Western narratives.

An earlier mapping of EU-related disinformation documented misleading claims circulating through online media and social media platforms, portraying EU institutions as illegitimate, European integration as a threat to sovereignty and accession as an unattainable objective. These also included narratives misrepresenting EU digital regulation as an instrument of censorship and control. Although the mapping preceded the election campaign, it illustrates the types of anti-EU narratives present in the wider online information environment.

Young people's reliance on online platforms makes their exposure to such narratives particularly relevant. An

online survey conducted by Zašto ne among 203 respondents aged 18–35 found that 69.5% identified social media as one of their primary sources of information, while 77.8% believed they encountered false or manipulated information online daily. Although attitudes towards the EU were predominantly positive, only around 14% identified European integration and foreign policy among their three most important issues.

Although the survey is not nationally representative and does not establish a causal relationship between exposure to information manipulation and political attitudes, these findings highlight the importance of examining how EU-related narratives circulate on online platforms and reach younger audiences, particularly in relation to their understanding of European integration and democratic processes.

5. Conclusion

The findings from Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2026 general elections illustrate how misleading narratives undermining confidence in electoral institutions and foreign political and media influence intersect with manipulative practices on VLOPs. Particularly concerning are documented tactics of coordinated and potentially inauthentic activity, artificial engagement and opaque political promotion, which can distort political discussions and perceptions of public support. Such practices pose risks to the integrity of electoral discourse and public trust in democratic processes, raising questions about platforms' ability to effectively identify and mitigate them.

These observations are relevant to the European Commission's scrutiny of systemic risks under the Digital Services Act (DSA), particularly those affecting civic discourse and electoral processes. While the monitoring does not establish the overall reach or impact of the documented activities, or whether platforms have failed to implement effective mitigation measures, it provides concrete indications of practices that merit further examination.

We therefore encourage the Commission to take these findings into account in its assessment and enforcement

activities under the DSA, particularly when examining the adequacy of platforms' risk assessments and mitigation measures and whether they sufficiently address coordinated manipulation and its potential cross-border implications.

